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New York State Canal Corporation Launches SUNY/Erie Canal Bicentennial Forum Series with focus on Accessible Recreation on the Canalway

Forum and expo explored opportunities for Canal communities and partners to enhance accessibility and inclusion along the New York State Canal system and Canalway Trail

Video and Audio Clips from Today's Event are Available [Here](#)

Photos are Available [Here](#)

The New York State Canal Corporation today hosted the first installment of its SUNY/Erie Canal Bicentennial Forum Series as part of New York State's commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the original Erie Canal's opening in 1825 and the waterway's continued influence on the state. Today's forum at Monroe Community College in Brighton focused on ways local governments, businesses and recreational service providers can make the New York State Canal system and Canalway Trail more accessible and welcoming for people with and without disabilities. Coinciding with the event's panel discussions was a vendor expo that showcased adaptive equipment and information to further assist attendees in making Canal communities more accessible.

"Since it's opening nearly 200 years ago, the Erie Canal has had a profound impact on our state and today's focus on accessibility and inclusion is just one example of how this industrial waterway continues to evolve as it supports an incredible network of recreational activities," said **New York State Canal Corporation Director Brian U. Stratton**. "The Canal system and Canalway Trail provide endless opportunities for adventure, fresh air, and exercise, but there are often barriers for people with disabilities. Today's event is working to remove those barriers by providing the information, inspiration and motivation to municipal leaders and businesses along the canal that are seeking to make their community more accessible."

With more than 120 attendees present, the audience learned that according to [Cornell University](#) one in five Americans lives with a disability. Further, the buying power of people with disabilities along with their direct family members is \$1 trillion, making the case for the substantial economic impact of accessible and inclusive recreation.

The forum was broken into two panel discussions – "Disability, Accessibility, and Inclusion," moderated by New York State's Chief Disability Officer, Kim Hill Ridley and

the second panel, moderated by John Robinson, CEO of Our Ability, focused on “Implementing Accessible Opportunities – Assisting Canal Providers/Municipalities.” The first panel served as important education on understanding ableism and culture, leading to inclusion and employment, reframing our language, reframing disability, planning from a perspective of functional ability and the importance of universal design, as well as the role of Independent Living Centers. The second panel built on this foundation, providing specific examples of organizations focused in this space, how to incorporate inclusion in their areas and organizations, and the system view needed to make inclusion a reality.

New York State Chief Disability Officer Kimberly Hill Ridley said, “The New York State Canal system is a treasure trove of history and recreational opportunities and by making the water and trails more accessible and inclusive, we open them up to a whole new segment of the population. An accessible canalway benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities, as it creates a more vibrant and diverse community experience and leads to new partnerships and economic opportunities where everyone feels welcome.”

New York Power Authority Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer Nancy Harvey said, “People with disabilities represent a substantial growing market with specific recreation needs and preferences. Integrating accessibility into our recreational offerings allows the Power Authority and Canal Corporation, along with other organizations, the ability to welcome a broader audience, and unlock and tap into the ever-growing accessible tourism space. By championing and prioritizing accessibility, our organization demonstrates its commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and contributing to building a more equitable and inclusive New York State.”

New York Secretary of State Robert J. Rodriguez said, “As one of New York’s most prized jewels, the Erie Canal is a wonder of engineering, recreation and history that should be enjoyed by all, regardless of ability. This forum is a testament to the tremendous efforts taken by state agencies, like the Department of State, NYPA, the Canal Corporation, and SUNY, and devoted private individuals and organizations to make the Erie Canal as accessible and enjoyable as humanly possible.”

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Executive Director Bob Radliff said, “The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor is incorporating accessibility into initiatives and programs and collaborating with others to make the Canalway Corridor welcoming and accessible for all. Through our 1st Mile Canalway Challenge, accessible itineraries, adaptive recreation events, and infrastructure upgrades, we hope more people with disabilities and their families and friends will experience the canals that transformed America.”

Monroe Community College President Dr. Deanna R. Burt-Nanna said, “At Monroe Community College we live our core values of community, inclusiveness, integrity, excellence, empowerment and stewardship through our actions which includes always seeking out new and innovative ways to eliminate barriers for all those in our community. As our Brighton Campus stands adjacent to the Erie Canal, we see it as an extension of

us and welcome the opportunity to be a part of the extraordinary efforts being made to ensure everyone in our community can enjoy all this beautiful waterway has to offer.”

As part of the Canal Corporation’s continued commitment to ensuring the canal waterways and trails are accessible for all outdoor recreational enthusiasts, this season’s “On the Canals” program seeks to provide greater opportunities for accessible and inclusive outings that will allow people with and without disabilities to participate together. With more than 30,000 participants over the last four years, “On the Canals” offers a variety of free activities including kayaking, cycling, boat tours, birding, wildlife hikes, and painting. To learn more about “On the Canals” and the accessible adventures available, please visit the program’s [website](#).

The SUNY/Erie Canal Bicentennial Forum series is a collaboration of the Canal Corporation, the New York Power Authority, the State University of New York (SUNY), and the New York State Department of State. The series will continue through 2024 and 2025 as a component of the New York State Erie Canal Bicentennial celebration announced by Governor Hochul during the 2024 State of the State address. Additional forums will focus on ensuring the Erie Canal and 524-mile New York State Canal system remains a vibrant economic contributor and is sustainable for the next 100 years. The Erie Canal’s Bicentennial celebration will culminate with the 2025 World Canals Conference in Buffalo.

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About the New York State Canal Corporation

New York’s Canal system includes four historic canals: the Erie, Champlain, Oswego, and Cayuga – Seneca. Spanning 524 miles, the waterway links the Hudson River with the Great Lakes, the Finger Lakes and Lake Champlain. The canals form the backbone of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and connect hundreds of unique communities.

The New York State Canal Corporation is a subsidiary of the New York Power Authority.

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